

# AMERICAN CAVALRY OF THE REVOLUTION

by A. G. Brackett

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FEELING some interest in the American cavalry which served during the Revolutionary war and which properly belonged to the Continental line, the writer of this article has been at considerable pains to ascertain their organization, the names of the officers, and such other matters connected with them as cannot fail to be of interest to the people of the United States both North and South. This cavalry did some very good service on several occasions, and aided in no small degree in achieving our national independence. They were few in number but were commanded by officers who took great pains with them and who led them gallantly whenever an opportunity offered. The first cavalry troop which was raised during the Revolutionary struggle was in Virginia, and was authorized by the Convention of Williamsburg, on the 13th of June, 1776. Theodorick Bland was appointed captain of this troop, and it served for some time in the State where it was raised. Five companies more were raised, and the whole six were then organized into the First regiment of light dragoons, and placed under the command of Bland, who was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel commandant. In September, 1777, this regiment joined the main army, and was attached to the division commanded by Lord Sterling. Bland was present in Pulaski's command during the battle of Brandywine on the 11th of September, 1777, and served under him for some time afterward. Pulaski understood English imperfectly, as the following quaint order from him to Colonel Bland will show.

From Count Pulaski. Military orders.

*head quarter, Worcester township, let October, 1777.*

Sir,

agreeable to hia exoellencie's order, you would detach fyftyne good horse very early in the morning, to attend general Reed and Cadwalader, upon special business, they will find general Reed at his quarters, a mile or two to the right of Conner's house.

besides major Jimpson\*<sup>1</sup> will select so many Light horses as he can, to be Ready to march with him to-morrow, twelve of clock, to the same hour, all your Regiment, shall joigne, at my quarter, the other Regimens of my brigade.

Pulaski, B. G.\*\*<sup>2</sup> of Cavalry.

to Colonel Bland.

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<sup>1</sup> [Footnote in original] \* Major [John] Jameson.

<sup>2</sup> [Footnote in original] \*\* Brigadier General.

In January, 1778, Bland's regiment of light dragoons was quartered at Winchester, Virginia, and in March, General Washington, then at Valley Forge, selected him in company with Colonel George Baylor, to purchase six hundred cavalry horses in Virginia and North Carolina for the Continental service. In August of the same year he was ordered to report at headquarters with such horses and recruits as he had procured. In November, 1779, Colonel Bland retired from service, and was succeeded in command by Colonel Walton S. White, of Virginia. Bland was afterward a delegate in Congress from Virginia.

The Second regiment of light dragoons was commanded by Colonel Elisha Sheldon, of Connecticut, and was made up mostly of Eastern men. This was a fine regiment, and appears to have been an especial favorite of Washington. A portrait of Sheldon, painted by Trumbull, may be seen in the rotunda of the Capitol at Washington. The uniform of Sheldon's light horse was a black leather helmet, with horse-hair falling crest; a blue coatee, faced with buff; buff breeches and huge jack boots. This is the same uniform as that worn by Lee's Legion, and was, in fact, the regular uniform of the Continental cavalry during that war, though Moylan's regiment wore a different one.

The Third regiment of light dragoons was commanded by Colonel George Baylor, of Virginia; William Washington was lieutenant-colonel. He was from South Carolina, and an excellent officer. Colonel Baylor with a portion of the regiment was surprised and his men cut to pieces, at Old Tappan, on the Hackensack River, September 24, 1778, by a party of British soldiers under command of Brigadier-General Grey. Out of one hundred and four privates, sixty-seven were killed, wounded or taken prisoners. Colonel Baylor was dangerously wounded and made prisoner. Lieutenant-Colonel Washington with another portion of the regiment was more successful in the South against the enemy, and this portion of it was called "Washington's Legion." It gained a very high reputation, and was beyond doubt an excellent body of troops.

The Fourth regiment of light dragoons was commanded by Colonel Stephen Moylan, an Irishman by birth, but appointed from the State of Pennsylvania. In these days we are apt to think that our old Revolutionary heroes were poorly supplied with arms, clothing, ammunition, etc., but this was far from being the case except in certain instances. It certainly was not true with regard to Moylan's regiment, which was kept in the highest state of discipline and efficiency, and a French gentleman who was travelling through the States during that war, pronounces Moylan a finished gentleman, and his dragoons as fine mounted troops as he had ever seen—and this gentleman had seen most of the armies of Europe. Moylan was made a brigadier-general by brevet, November 3, 1783.

The cavalry legion of the Duke of Lauzun, a French nobleman, came to this country from France and served until the close of the Revolutionary war. It numbered six hundred men, was finely uniformed and equipped, and did good service, which has never been properly appreciated by our countrymen, who were too much given to extolling themselves and entirely ignoring the gallant Frenchmen who so nobly aided us in the hour of our trial. The good Washington thought highly of this command, and when it

sailed for France, he wrote a letter to the duke thanking him for his services and highly commending him. Upon his return to France, Lauzun commanded a regiment of hussars in the service of Louis XVI. These men were true to the king, and assisted him in his attempted escape with Marie Antoinette in the "Journey to Varennes."

"Lee's Legion," commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel commandant Henry Lee, or "Light Horse Harry," was a regular Continental organization, and did more real fighting than any cavalry corps during the war. It consisted of five companies. The officers of this legion were, Lieutenant-Colonel, Henry Lee; Major, Henry Peyton (died); Major, Joseph Eggleston; Surgeons, Matthew Irwin and Alexander Skinner; Lieutenant and Adjutant, William Winston; Sergeant-Major, John Champe; Captains, Patrick Carnes, Ferdinand O'Neal, James Armstrong, Michael Rudolph and George Handy; Lieutenants, Lawrence Manning, Peter Johnson, William Lewis (died), George Carrington and George Guthrie; Cornets, Robert Power, John Jordan, William Middleton, Albion Throckmorton and William B. Harrison; Ensign, Clement Carrington.

Sergeant Champe enjoyed the confidence of Washington, and was employed by him on several expeditions of a secret nature. One of these, which had for its object the capture of the traitor General Arnold, was very near being successful. On account of his faithfulness and good conduct Champe obtained much distinction.

Adjutant Winston was an excellent officer, and after the close of the Revolutionary War, was selected to command the first "squadron" of United States cavalry ever formed under the present Federal Government. This was by an act of Congress of March 5, 1792, and Winston had the rank of "Major Commandant." Major Michael Rudolph commanded the squadron for a short time before Winston, but he soon left the service.

The foregoing were all of the Continental or Regular regiments which served during the struggle for independence. But there were other organizations of Militia which did much good service and aided our cause very considerably. The most celebrated of these was Marion's corps from South Carolina. When this body was first formed, Francis Marion received from the State of South Carolina the commission of Lieutenant-Colonel and subsequently became a Brigadier-General. The other field officer was Major Horry, and both of them have been rendered celebrated by the pen of Weems. This organization would in these days be considered as "mounted infantry," and in the unsuccessful attempt to storm Savannah, Ga., in the Autumn of 1779, it suffered very much. Captain Charles Motte, Lieutenants Alexander Hume, James Grey and Cornelius Van Vlieland were killed, as was the brave Sergeant William Jasper who fell while attempting to plant the American colors on the parapet of Spring Hill redoubt. Many of the men were killed and wounded in this sanguinary affair. Here too fell Count Casimir Pulaski, of Poland, Brigadier-General of cavalry in the American service.

After this action Marion retreated to the interior, whence he was able to harass the British for a long time. The movements and actions of these troops were of a most

romantic character, and the name of their leader is one of the most highly honored in our Nation.

On the 19th of August, 1779, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Lee, with a portion of his dragoons and infantry men surprised the post of Paulus Hook, opposite to New York, and took one hundred and fifty-nine British soldiers prisoners, having lost only two of his own party killed and three wounded. Great praise was bestowed upon Lee for the skill and bravery with which he executed this daring scheme, and Congress awarded him a medal commemorative of the event.

When Major André was captured near Tarrytown, he was taken at once to Lieutenant-Colonel Jameson, of Sheldon's regiment of dragoons, who was stationed at an outpost at North Castle with a party of dragoons. After examining his papers, he sent Andre, under charge of Major Tallmadge, also of Sheldon's regiment, to Colonel Sheldon, whose quarters were at New Salem, for greater security. It was here that André made his confession and proved that General Arnold was a traitor.

It was shortly after this event that Sergeant Champe, of Lee's Legion, was sent to New York to attempt the capture of Arnold. Champe was a man of great courage and sagacity, and his project of capturing the traitor General failed, not through his own neglect, but on account of circumstances over which he had no control. Champe pretended to desert from his regiment and was, in fact, fired upon by his own comrades while riding toward the British boats lying on the Hudson River.

Pursuant to orders given by Major-General Greene, on the 2d and 3d of November, 1782, the First and Third regiments of dragoons, then serving in South Carolina, were consolidated and formed into five troops, agreeably to an order given to Greene by the Secretary of War. The following officers were retained in this organization: Colonel George Baylor, commissioned January 8, 1777; Lieutenant-Colonel William Washington; Major John Swan, commissioned October 21, 1780; Captain Churchill Jones, commissioned June 1, 1777; Captain John Watts, commissioned April 7, 1778; Captain William Barrett, commissioned May, 1779; Captain William Parsons, commissioned November, 1779; Captain John Hughes, commissioned March 31, 1781.

In this way the regiment served until the close of the Revolutionary War, when it was disbanded, the officers and men returning to their homes and pursuing the arts of peace.

Captain John Watts attained the rank of Major in the Revolutionary War, in which he was wounded three times. After the formation of the present Government, and when difficulties occurred with France, he was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel commandant of the first regiment of United States cavalry ever formed; this was on the 8th of January, 1799. He was a Virginian, and died in Bedford County, Virginia, on the 8th of June, 1830.

The uniform for the cavalry which was raised for the Provisional Army of 1798 and '99, was a subject of great importance; and in General Washington's letter to Hon. James McHenry, Secretary of War, dated Philadelphia, December 13, 1798, he recommends that it be as follows: A green coat, with white facings, white linings and buttons, white vest and breeches, with black helmet caps. Each colonel to be distinguished by two epaulets; each major by one epaulet on the right shoulder and a strap on the left. All the field officers to wear red plumes. Captains to be distinguished by an epaulet on the right shoulder; lieutenants by one on the left shoulder. Sergeant-majors and quartermaster-sergeants to be distinguished by two red worsted epaulets; sergeants by one epaulet on right shoulder. All persons belonging to the Army to wear a black cockade, with a small white eagle in the centre. During the Revolution, the cockade of the Americans was black, and that of the French white. Out of compliment to the French, Washington had the American soldiers wear a cockade made of white and black.

The above uniform recommended by the General-in-Chief has too much white about it for cavalry men. It is difficult to keep it clean; and when a horseman has to clean his horse, his arms, his clothing, and himself, he has enough to do, and the dark blue now issued is much better than the white.

The officers mentioned in this article were some of the best in the Continental service. Colonel Walton A. White, or Anthony Walton White, of Virginia, was appointed a Brigadier-General in the Provisional Army—which it was thought it would be necessary to raise, on account of the differences between the United States and the French Republic—on the 19th of July, 1798; but he was not actively employed, and his commission expired on the 15th of June, 1800. Our war with France was of short duration, and aside from the capture of the French ships of war, *L'Insurgente* and *L'Invincible*, by Commodore Truxton, in the frigate *Constellation*, no open acts of hostility were committed. Of the majors who served in the First dragoons, John Belfield, John Swan and David Hopkins, all of whom were from Virginia, little is known after the close of the Revolution.

The field officers of the Second regiment, Colonel Elisha Sheldon, Lieutenant Colonel Jameson, and Major Benjamin Tallmadge, of Connecticut, all retired when hostilities with Great Britain ceased, and did not again enter the service. These men won the respect and confidence of the Commanding General.

Colonel George Baylor, of the Third regiment, also retired, but the Lieutenant-Colonel, William Washington, who had been severely wounded while serving as a captain of infantry at the battle of Trenton, was subsequently appointed brigadier-general on the 19th of July, 1798, and served as such until the Army was disbanded on the 15th of June, 1800. He returned to South Carolina, where he died on the 6th of March, 1810. Major Richard Call, of this regiment, returned to his home in Virginia when the war closed, but subsequently served as a major in the First sub-legion of infantry, and died in service on the 28th of September, 1792.

Colonel Stephen Moylan, of Pennsylvania, and Lieutenant-Colonel Benjamin Temple, of Virginia, retired from the service at the close of the war. It will be seen that the sons of the “ Old Dominion “ held the lion’s share of the cavalry grades, and the same may be said of the other arms of the service.

“Light-Horse Harry Lee,” of Lee’s Legion, and father of Robert Edmund Lee, late General-in-Chief of the so-called Confederacy, was, after the close of the Revolution, Governor of Virginia, in 1791; and commanded the militia of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia, which was sent against the insurgents in Pennsylvania in 1794. He was appointed a major-general in the Provisional Army on the 19th of July, 1798, and his commission terminated on the 1st of June, 1800. He was a representative in Congress from Virginia from 1799 to 1801, and died near St. Mary’s, Georgia, on the 25th of March, 1818. His last years were very unhappy.

The uniform of Moylan’s Fourth regiment of light dragoons must have been exceedingly handsome—it was, according to the “Historical Magazine”— green cloak, red cape, green coat turned up with red, red waistcoat, buckskin breeches, and a leather cap turned up with bearskin.

Captain Carbury’s troop of light dragoons wore blue coats, turned up with red, sleeves and collar red, red jacket, buckskin breeches, boots, carbine and belt.

This question about the uniforms worn during the Revolution is one that is far from being settled. The probability is that most of our soldiers wore the dress of the Whig party of England, which was blue and buff, in contradistinction to the Tories, who wore scarlet. We know that Washington wore a uniform of buff and blue, and a most picturesque one it was, too. The most of our dragoons wore the same kind of uniform, with, of course, the addition of the black helmet. Marion’s men wore that peculiar kind of clothing known as the “butternut,” which is familiar to most of our people on account of its being worn by the soldiers of the Confederacy in the late Rebellion, though they claimed gray to be their color, probably because it was a mixture of white and black—a regular “miscegenation.” But the butternut, or mulatto color, was the one in which their soldiers most frequently appeared. “True Blue” was reserved for the Yankees.

Some of the militia cavalry of Revolutionary times was not very serviceable, and that which was first formed in Connecticut and which joined the main army, was the subject of no small degree of ridicule. But Sheldon’s regiment, made up of Connecticut men in great part, set this matter all right, and taught both friend and foe to respect it. Some of the Virginia companies, too, were miserably made up, and their ridiculous appearance was anything but gratifying to the “Chivalry” of that State.

For the most part the horses used during the war in the cavalry service were of superior quality, and were selected with great care. Lieutenant Colonel Lee was an excellent judge of horses, and he purchased the animals for his men. Beside this, many of the soldiers rode thoroughbreds which were their own individual property. On the whole, the men were exceedingly well mounted, and the horses do not appear to have died off in

such numbers, proportionally, as has been the case in our more recent wars. The men were kept employed on picket and outpost duty in the Northern and Eastern States, while those who served in South Carolina and Georgia were sometimes obliged to make marches of very considerable distance. The principal cavalry officer of the British service who was pitted against our people in the States of South Carolina and Georgia was Colonel Tarleton, who was certainly a most excellent officer, and it is a question whether any of our cavalymen were at all his equal. In fact, Tarleton has had few superiors in any service, and his name was remembered with terror for years after the war by the people of the South. Even now, in that section of the country, unruly youngsters are frightened into good behavior by the name of Tarleton.

There was some hard fighting in the Southern States, but under the leadership of Major-General Nathaniel Greene, of Rhode Island, whom General Winfield Scott has declared the ablest military man of the Revolution, the British were soon confined to the cities of Charleston and Savannah.

In the campaigns through North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, General Greene had with him Lee's legion, a portion of the Third dragoons, under Lieutenant-Colonel Washington and Marion's men, besides a respectable force of infantry. These men all acquitted themselves with the greatest credit, and at the battle of Eutaw Springs, on the 8th day of September, 1781, Lieutenant-Colonel Washington was taken prisoner and kept by the enemy some time. There is an air of romance over the deeds of our Revolutionary heroes in these adventures in the South which sends a thrill of emotion through every true patriot; their camps amid the dense foliage of Southern woods; their fights by the banks of the swift running streams; and their marches through a new and sparsely settled country abounding with game, all have a charm which soldiers love to dwell upon.

Thus is given a brief sketch of our cavalry heroes who were engaged in our struggle for independence; they have all long since been gathered to the "Land of their Fathers," but the memory of them is still fresh in the hearts of their countrymen.

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Transcribed by William Thomas Sherman

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